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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

DATE: December 19, 1978

SUBJECT : Magdalena Prison Conditions

PLACE : United States Chancery, Buenos Aires

PARTICIPANTS: Mr. Jorge Vazquez, Former Under Secretary of Foreign Relations, Recently Released from Magdalena Prison
Mr. F. Allen Harris, Political Officer, American Embassy, Buenos Aires

COPIES TO :	ARA/ECA	- Mr. Bumpus	AMB
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Biographic Information

Jorge Vazquez was the Foreign Ministry Under Secretary and Ambassador-at-Large during the Campora government in 1973. According to Vazquez, he was elected President of the Student Federation of Cordoba as a Catholic activist in the late 60's. He received a Fulbright in 1967 to study diplomacy at George Washington University prior to entering the Argentine Foreign Service. As a rising young diplomat, he made the wrong wager in the Argentine political game and as a result, has spent the last two and a half years in prison.

Prison Conditions at Magdalena Military Jail

Vazquez described Magdalena Prison as a sociological wonderland. The prison population until the recent releases of the

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high level Peronists on conditional liberty was made up of 200 Army officers, NCO's, and enlisted men, a hundred or so Jehovah Witnesses convicted by military courts, 24 "terrorists" and 14 former Peronist government and labor leaders. The dominant group in the prison is the military prisoners serving sentences for refusing the bear arms. The fervently religious Jehovah Witnesses are actively proselytizing the other prisoners. In 1978 the group converted an officer and two NOC's and produced a major scandal within the jail.

According to Vazquez, the regime for the military prisoners is incredibly lenient. All the military prisoners on good behavior are allowed to leave the prison each Friday night and must report back to the prison by Tuesday evening. Thus, the military prisoners spend three days in Magdalena prison and four days with their families. Many have jobs. Several of the incarcerated military officers own and run restaurants in Buenos Aires.

Vazquez mentioned that included among the 200 non-religious military prisoners are six right-wing former officials of the Army Intelligence Service (SIE) who are serving time for extortion and other monetary crimes. Another well-known case is that of Colonel Esteban Rodriguez who headed a car theft ring which has been charged with stealing 200 vehicles.

In contrast, the treatment of the 24 subversives serving military tribunal sentences is extremely severe. These prisoners are kept in a separate area. There are, however, some jail-house communications between these prisoners and the rest of the jail population through the guards. Jacobo Timerman was held in this section of the prison. Most of the terrorists are psychologically depressed and reportedly cry a great deal.

The Peronists were well treated in Magdalena. Their rooms were adequate, some even had private bathrooms. The food was ample. Meat was served daily. Family visits were permitted twice a week and conjugal visits were allowed. Spanish language reading material on non-political subjects was freely allowed, as was television.

Vazquez noted that mixed in among the senior Peronist political prisoners was Mr. Massola, a tailor, who was held for a year and a half for his sartorial relationship with David Graiver. (NOTE: All the senior Peronist prisoners were released in late 1978 reportedly as one of Adm. Massera's last political initiatives before leaving the Junta.)

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Personal History

Vazquez stated that he was picked up shortly after the March, 1976 coup by Federal Police and taken to their Buenos Aires Headquarters. He was held there for 13 days. He was not "picanaed," but was severely beaten. During his interrogation, all his front teeth were knocked out. A \$2 million ransom was requested for his release. When the Federal Police's ransom request was passed on to his family, they immediately contacted the Deputy Commander of the First Corps, who sent a military patrol to the Federal Police Headquarters to obtain Vazquez' transfer. He was then taken to the Army First Corps Headquarters in Palermo where he lunched amicably with Colonel Nuñez, then chief of First Corps Intelligence. He was then transferred to Villa Devoto, later placed under the Executive (PEN) Detention and under the Acta Institucional and transferred to Magdalena Prison.

Recent Political Contacts

Vazquez is under conditional liberty. His movements are restricted to San Isidro (a suburban town) and the Federal Capital. However, since his release, he has had an hour and a quarter private meeting with Army Commander-in-Chief General Viola, met with Secretary General of Air Force Brigadier Lami Dozo and Deputy Secretary General of the Navy Rear Admiral Luchetta. According to Vazquez, Viola encouraged him to travel abroad as soon as the Institutional Act proceedings are cleared up. Viola reportedly characterized him as the type of moderate political leader which the Argentine government needs.

Vazquez mentioned that he is a close personal friend of Eduardo Vargas, Executive Director of the Inter-American Human Rights Commission. Vargas, a former legal advisor in the Chilean Foreign Office, and Vazquez became good friends during the latter's diplomatic assignment to Santiago in late 60's. Vargas is the godfather of one of Vazquez' children.

(NOTE: The special treatment accorded to Vazquez may be an attempt by the Argentine government officials to exploit Vazquez' strong personal friendship with Vargas.)

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DCM: MChaplin
POLCOUNS: WHHallman

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